

# Environmental Aesthetics

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JOHN K. GRANDE

How do we differentiate between an appreciation of nature and our experience of being in nature? This question now seems crucial to anyone interested in notions of environmental beauty. Nature generates itself regardless of human activity and virtually everything, including ourselves in nature. One finds chaos and order in nature just as one finds it in human life. Wilderness areas in the world today, even in the remotest regions, generally carry with them traces of human intervention. Even our vast North American nature parks such as Yellowstone and Banff have been effectively designed with the tourist and nature lover in mind. The roads that traverse them, the parking lots and attractions are all suitably placed to afford a "view" of nature. Our parks designs are orchestrated to provide the visitor with a sense of reassurance and the roads, paths, signology promote a pristine, hands-off experience of nature. In *The Culture of Nature*, Alexander Wilson comments:

"If the discourse of conservation is now often posed as a matter of survival, clearly that survival is cultural as well as bioregional. It's as if these new places on Earth (our National parks) acknowledge the wall or hedge between civilization and the natural world.<sup>1</sup>

As a North American youth living in Sri Lanka in the mid-1960's, my conception of nature had already been indelibly imprinted with the point of view that nature and human culture were two separate worlds. In North America history, like nature, was what you saw, entirely visible. Asia astonished me precisely because nature was not at all pristine yet had a kind of lived-in majesty. Asia's extensive cultural history could be witnessed in numerous outdoor monuments to Buddha and frescoes such as Lion's Rock in Sigiriya, but there was an invisible history as well. Cultural relics and signs of human history could just as readily be obscured, buried under nature as be visible to the bystander. North Americans now realize a history preceded our own on this continent, that of the Amerindians. Their viewpoint implied an ecologically integrated vision of human culture and nature. In the words of Chief Standing Bear, an Ogalala Sioux:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills and the winding streams with tangled growth as 'wild'. Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. Earth was bountiful, and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Yet an attitude that segregates human culture from nature, perceives the two as parallel rather than complementary histories still persists. If we must differentiate between an appreciation of nature and our actual experience of nature, in doing so we generally apply a set of values to the question. An aesthetic of nature presupposes firstly that nature is a subject,

something we look at, and are not directly involved in, and secondly that beauty is a value we apply to nature. The roots of this dilemma, to my mind, were initiated in the nineteenth century. A typical writer's commentary of the time, that of Washington Irving:

Nothing can be more imposing than the magnificence of English park scenery. Vast lawns that extend like sheets of vivid green, with here and there clumps of gigantic trees, heaping up rich piles of foliage: the solemn pomp of groves and woodland glades, with the deer trooping in silent herds across them; the hare, bounding away to the covert; or the pheasant, suddenly bursting upon the wing: the brook, taugth to wind in natural meanderings or expand into a glassy lake: the sequestered pool, reflecting the quivering trees, with the yellow leaf sleeping on its bosom, and the trout roaming fearlessly about its limpid waters.<sup>3</sup>

Washington Irving's description of nature and human culture implies that the two are superimposed on one another to achieve a sublime beauty. Nature is panoramic, a subject to be described in a manner similar to J. M. W. Turner's and John Constable's Romantic paintings of the English landscape. It is interesting how constructed and synthetic Irving's description of nature actually is, for Romanticism emerged in tandem with industrialism in the West. The landscape was generalized and filtered through an aesthetic of the sublime and beautiful. Today's landscape is neither Romantic nor pristine, yet in the West we continue to generalize and simplify nature. When looking at a natural forest or landscape, we will generalize its elements, visually. Seldom do we actually look at the diversity of camouflaged, co-dependent elements that go to make up a specific microcosm of nature. A forest is just a forest and a tree is just a tree. When we look at a tree, no different from the kind of tree our ancestors saw one thousand years ago, , we say nature reproduces its own forms, when in fact nature procreates itself. All materials that surround us, man-made or natural, derive from nature. With an awareness of this, we can achieve a better understanding of the basis of an aesthetic world view. Experience in an environmental sense implies that we accept the lesser place of the individual within a continuum of nature.

An integrative view of human culture and nature demands that we accept all elements of a given environment, both the ugly and the beautiful. We generally sequester the less beautiful aspects, filter out the negative elements. This "anaesthetic" viewpoint is a product of the discontinuity of our contemporary environments, where humanity is segregated from nature. It is a learned attitude that corresponds with an age of mass production and technology. A flower, a tree, a building site or industrial wasteland, all these things can be read as a multiplicity of elements, a composite and part of a greater whole, just as the built environment comprises a relativity of competing elements, each designed in relation to the next. Such a point of view provides one with the capacity to envisage environments, land forms, non-human life, man-made structures and environments as continuous and co-related. The aesthetic in this sense, depends on our accepting a holistic point of view toward organic and inorganic materials, environment and human culture.

As Arnold Berleant notes in *Living in the Landscape: Towards an Aesthetics of Environment*, environmental aesthetics has a humanistic function that includes the practical

but goes further. The objects no longer perceived in the modernist sense where the object is a means to an external end, nor is it a medium through which we function with intensity and purity of experience. Instead humanistic function becomes:

(...) the entire setting, the aesthetic field, within which there is an experiential merging of the perceiver and the object of art in a creative perceptual exchange. Here function becomes active participation, combining the mechanical, organic, and practical aspects (...) a synthesis of aesthetic perception, social relevance, and human fulfilment develops into a cultural environment in which each of these not only encompasses the others but also becomes inseparable from them.<sup>4</sup>

Sculpture adapts itself well to outdoor sites and environments. Three-dimensional, it is perhaps the most suggestive and capable of bridging the gap between an aesthetic and phenomenological view of nature. Yet to witness the ancient frescoes or sculptures in India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere is to realize there has been a long history of intervention into natural sites by artists, long before modernist notions of art ever existed. How do we reconcile an environmental vision of art with a modernist historical one? Modernist art has always been immersed in the notion that the individual creates the artwork. It does not directly involve community or collective culture. Herein lies the dilemma for environmental artists working today. Socially relevant art is not necessarily ecologically pertinent. A gap exists between the I-ness of formalist expression and the more poignant, intuitive side of human nature. The latter is ecologically pertinent, cannot be contained by traditional or avant-gardist imperatives.

Modernism has created such an immense lineage of creative work that we now tend to distrust works of art created by individuals purported to communicate broader issues, precisely because artistic practice has become categorized, removed from holistic cultural enterprise. One pertinent example of an art that embraces these realities effectively, to my mind, is Antony Gormley's *Field* project (1993) originally created in the Cholula Valley in Mexico. Engaging a family of brickmakers, and using local clay, Gormley's *Field* project was not only culture specific but also had global implications. The resulting grouping of 40,000 terracotta figurines, each made to the size of a hand was a collaborative effort and involved an aesthetics of inclusion, not only of the immediate landscape material, but also the people who live there.

## Notes and References

1. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), p. 254.
2. Chief Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston, 1933), in T.C. McLuhan, *Touch the Earth: Native American Testimony* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).
3. Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book*, (New York: G.P.Putnam, 1863), pp.96-97.
4. Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Towards an Aesthetics of Environment*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, forthcoming 1997.

5867 Durocher, Outremont,  
Quebec H2V 3Y5,  
Canada